FOLK-MUSIC STUDIES.

I.

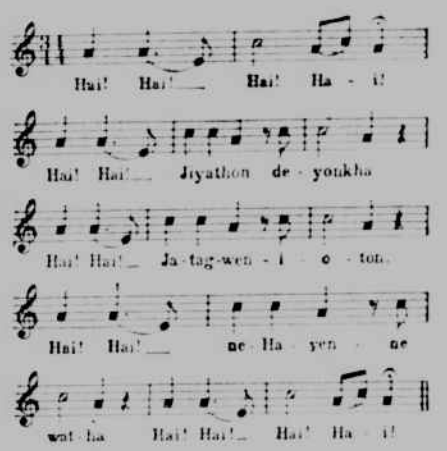
SONGS OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS.

A WIDE ETHNOLOGICAL FIELD—EARLY INTEREST AND CONTRADICTORY REPORTS—LOST WORDS AND MNEMONIC SYMBOLS—BIBLIOGRAPHY.

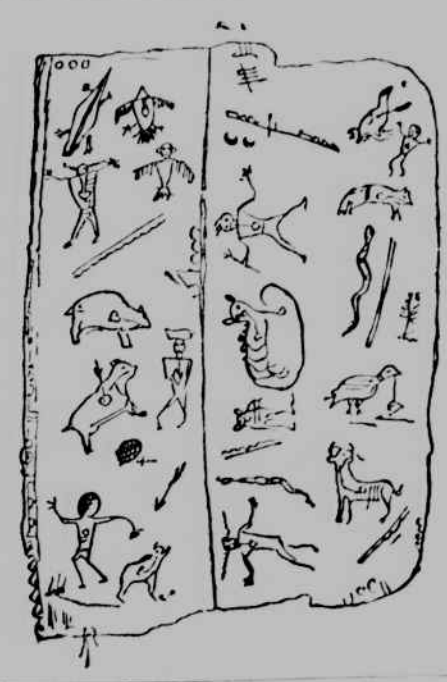
The seeker after ethnographic elements in the aboriginal music of the Americas has a vast body of literature to delve in. Books about the manners and customs of the Red Indians have been multiplied ever since the first accounts were sent to the Old World, and thousands of pages have been filled with descriptions of their songs and ceremonial dances. That in all this vast material there is little that is of use in the study of folk-music in its bearing on art is due to the inability of travellers as a rule to write down the music which they hear or to use the technical terms correctly in describing it. The one large fact proclaimed by the combined pages produced in the last four centuries is that no other savage races except those of Africa have so generally and enthusiastically practised music as the aborigines of America. The advantages for investigation being immeasurably greater in America than in Africa, it remains passing strange that the characteristic elements of Indian folk-music are little better known than those of African. That this is so has not been due to lack of interest in the subject. There is an account of Indian music in F. G. Sagard's work, "Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons," published in Paris in 1632, and the eminent German theoretician F. W. Marpurg made some "remarks on three songs of the Iroquois" in his "Historisch-Kritische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik," printed in Berlin in 1760. Torquemada and other Spanish writers tell us enough to make it plain that the music of the Indians of Mexico, Central America and Peru was as far in advance of the music of the savages of the North as their other products of civilization, yet what they tell us is told in general terms. Musical records and monuments are more perishable than those of stone, and their destruction in the Spanish-American country, consequently, even more complete. Ancient Tezcuco, we are told, was the seat of a national musical council, which looked after the education of the Aztec youth and encouraged the arts and sciences, and in Peru bards celebrated the deeds of the great and preserved their history in the manner practised by the bards of our ancestors; but what the art promoted by the Musical Council and practised by the Peruvian bards was like no one can tell. Double flutes, Pan's-pipes and instruments of baked clay have been found in tombs, but beyond the fact that they indicate the use of a scale of five tones (the universal pentatonic series), they tell us nothing of the "lascivious pleasings" to which they once gave voice. Some Peruvians who attended the Paris Exposition of 1867 played two melodies on their national instrument, and Ambroise Thomas wrote them down and harmonized them for three saxophones (see Commettant's "La Musique, les Musiciens et les Instruments, &c.") in the fond belief that they were specimens of the music which sounded in the ears of Pizarro and his robbers; but nothing certain can be said of them except that they are themes of a modern cast which might enlist the skill of the best contemporary contrapuntist.

While I shall refer the student to a long list of works containing allusions to Indian music or musical performances, therefore, I should like to have it understood that he is likely to learn little more than the general facts of musical ethnology from them. He may discover that the Indians of America, from Alaska to Terra del Fuego, have songs for all the solemn and festive functions of life: love songs and war songs; gambling songs; mystic chants with which the conjuring medicine man drives away disease and stills pain; songs of thanksgiving and songs of mourning. That everywhere musical instruments are employed, of which the most numerous and useful are the drums and rattles—drums with single heads of skin, like tambourines, and with double heads; rattles of gourds, hollowed wood, pieces of horn and turtle shells, and other familiar materials, and the notched stick or piece of bone which was a possession of the Indians of ancient days, when the wood-wind family, now confined to the plaintive flageolet, with which the Indian lover breathes out his passion, and a rudimentary three holed flute, had a greater variety of representatives, such as double flutes, resembling the diaulos of classic Greece, and the syrinx. Also he may learn of the one stringed Apache violin, like the cornstalk fiddle dear to the heart of the country lad, and the bow, which, when put to musical use, is the father at once of the Stradivarius violin and the Steinway pianoforte. He may also read of the pleasing voices and the uncouth of the Indians, of their finished and rude performances, their harsh, guttural, untuneful, melodyless gruntings, and their excellent tunes and perfect intonation; of their keenly discriminating ears, which cannot be satisfied with anything so crude as the European chromatic scale, and of their uncultivated ears, which cannot recognize the simple intervals of our diatonic succession; of music that knows no concord and music that is based on a keen sensibility to the scientific harmonic system. On two points only shall he find agreement, first, that Indian music is unwritten music, and, second, that its predominant element is the rhythm which is pounded out on drums, shaken out of rattles and rasped out of notched sticks.

The fact that Indian music is unwritten makes its study difficult, but the obstacle is lessened by the circumstance that tradition is as great a conservator among the Indians as it was among the people of classic antiquity in the early stages of their culture. It is easy to believe that a sanctity attaches to the melody of a sacred song as well as to its words, a greater, indeed, for there are many Indian songs whose words have wholly or in part lost their meaning, and of which it is not hard to believe (see the argument in my "Notes on the Cultivation of Choral Music") that the original music has been retained because of a superstitious veneration for it which did not attach in the same potency to the words. Bancroft (see bibliography) says the Indian boatmen near Fort Yukon sang songs "of which they did not understand the meaning of the words". Stephen Powers in his "Tribes of California" (in "Contributions to North American Ethnology," Vol. III, Washington, 1877) tells of hearing a "fixed choral, the words of which signify nothing and are repeated over and over ad libitum." Miss Alice C. Fletcher gives specimens of Omaha songs in which only a few words are intelligible, and a similar observation by Dr. Theodore Baker among the Iroquois Indians of New-York was duplicated by me among the Iroquois on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford in Canada. To illustrate: The ceremonial songs of these Indians are filled with an exclamation, "Hai!" which Horatio Hale, an admirable authority, translated as an exclamation, "Hail!" "Oh!" "Ah!" or "Alas!" as the occasion seemed to demand; but in the "American Anthropologist," Vol. XI, pp. 286-287, Mr. J. N. B. Hewitt argued that the word had its origin "in a supposed imitation of a supposed cry of a supposed being"—which shows at least how far speculation on this subject can be carried. Here is the beginning of an Iroquois litany used in the "Condoling Council" of the Iroquois, which I noted in Canada and which has its burden of this same "Hai! Hai!":



I have said that Indian music is unwritten music. It is this in the same sense and in the same degree that Indian languages are unwritten. Use is sometimes made of mnemonic symbols to preserve the melodies as well as the words of songs as may be learned in the books of Catlin and Schoolcraft. Here is a song of the Chippewa Indians, reproduced from an illustration in Catlin's book "Letters and Notes," etc. The symbols are merely aids to memory, like the arrangement of colored beads on the strings of wampum which are brought out to help the singers at the condoling council of the Iroquois, or the knotted ropes preserved in the Aztec temples.



Explaining this picture, Mr. Catlin said it was a song used by the medicine men preparatory to a so-called medicine hunt.

For nearly every animal which the Indians chase there is a certain season, which they inaugurate by making medicine for several days in order to insure success by conciliating the spirit of the bear, moose, beaver or whatever else the animal may be which they intend to hunt. The medicine men (or mystery men) alone possess the skill to decipher the symbolic figures. When, on such occasions, one of these persons sings from the mysterious chart, and accompanies his voice by beating his magic drum, all the people respond at certain intervals in chorus, and at the same time perform grotesque dances. (Engel, "An Introduction to National Music," p. 336.

These music charts, of which Dr. Baker also produces a specimen in colors in his "Ueber die Musik der Nordamerikanischen Wilden" a book to which I shall presently pay much attention, as also does Dr. Hoffman in the "Fourteenth Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology"—are like the famous "Wallam-Olum" of the White River Indians and the symbols on the wampum belts of the Iroquois. They are scarcely less indefinite than the neumæ used to record the Christian Church chants in the Middle Ages before the invention of the staff.

Out of all this the student may make deductions touching the psychology and ethnology of music without materially increasing his knowledge of Indian music in its bearing on national art. A second paper will have that consummation for its aim. Meanwhile the bibliography of the whole subject so far as it has seemed important to me, follows:

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H. E. K.

AMERICAN PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT.

From The London Lancet.

Dr. Angelo Mosso, while in America made a minute study of the system of physical education, particularly as carried out at the athletic clubs of the American seats of learning. He has just published his impressions of that system. Referring to the Boston Gymnasium, he says: "The interest and the wonder with which these academic adjuncts inspire me awaken a sense of melancholy when I think how far we in Italy are removed from such perfection. It is enough," he adds, "to look at the passers by in the American streets to be convinced how much more developed and strong they are than our compatriots. The boys and girls are in point of physique far superior to ours. All the public takes interest in physical exercises, every journal being compelled to report athletic competitions, regattas, football encounters, golf matches and such like, because its readers have even a greater enthusiasm for these topics than for the strife of parties. America teaches us, by the plain and most impressive of examples, that physical education may be carried to perfection without any military object. In the States no one dreams of becoming a soldier. If military force is required it is provided, as in Great Britain, by voluntary enlistment. Nevertheless, America and the British Isles are precisely the two countries where physical education has reached its highest development. My admiration for this New World is all the greater when I reflect that its civilization is that of the future, which even for Italy, will have better days in store."